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Oklahoma's 'Law Firm to the Poor' Needs Help; Pursuing Justice

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With an onionskin-thin budget several years back, Legal Services of Eastern Oklahoma, the area's largest "law firm to the poor," nearly became Lip Service of Eastern Oklahoma.

Funding cuts closed some satellite offices and reduced staff. Remaining attorneys could serve only a small percentage of the 303,000 potential clients. But LSEO persevered.

The budget still isn't big enough. One aid lawyer is available per 11,000 eligible clients compared to one attorney per 375 people in the general population.

Services are expanding, however, thanks to a \$1 million public fund drive, that is \$59,400 short of its goal. Tulsa attorney David Riggs, who heads the drive, is pushing for the community, especially local lawyers, to put it over the top.

"We're so close. We really want to reach that \$1 million mark," Riggs said.

Not many causes are as worthwhile. Riggs says legal-aid agencies help stabilize society; they're a safety net for those in need.

"They help people cope, help them seek redress for a grievance," Riggs said.

"For our legal system to work people need representation. A family's problems can be mitigated with some legal advice before they spill over into child delinquency, housing problems, unemployment, marital problems and deeper poverty."

The fund-raiser lost some steam following 9/11, and with staff distraction over the merger of LSEO with Legal Aid Services of Western Oklahoma. In January, the two agencies became Legal Aid Services of Oklahoma Inc.

The fund drive started with an appeal to local lawyers, who provided about a third of the donations. Businesses and foundations

also have helped. The Tulsa Foundation and businessman George Kaiser are major contributors. Sarkeys Foundation in Norman provided a gift of \$161,000 to update computers.

Historically, LSEO letter-writing campaigns generated from \$11,000 to \$25,000 annually, recalls Dallas Ferguson, a Tulsa attorney and board president of the new LASO. That amount hardly offset enormous cuts, beginning in 1996, by Congress to Legal Services Corp., the chief funding source for state legal-aid agencies.

Threatened with extinction, LSEO clawed its way back with the help of state funding, grant money and the Tulsa Area United Way. Meanwhile, the clients keep coming. At least three-quarters are women and children living in poverty. The agency helps more than 12,000 children a year. A third of LSEO's clients are the working poor who receive no government benefits. Many are senior citizens.

Riggs regrets that retired Tulsa attorney John Athens, a champion of legal aid, did not live to see how much the money has meant. Athens died last year. In his honor, The Oxley Foundation donated \$200,000 to expand a client hot line. That service, which will be expanded statewide, enables needy people to consult an attorney about civil legal problems, including rent and contract disputes, domestic abuse, consumer issues and custody matters. Attorneys handle no criminal cases.

R.H. Harbaugh, foundation trustee and a colleague of Athens at the Conner & Winters law firm, said his mentor had "a special interest in people who could not afford legal services. He was aware of the hot line and supported its expansion."

Said Riggs:

"We use lofty phrases such as 'with justice for all,' when we talk about our legal system. That phrase is etched on our U.S. Supreme Court building. Those are just empty words if people don't have access to that system."